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C O N F I D E N T I A L KYIV 000571

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2019

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SUBJECT: DEFENSE MINISTER SEES NATO ACCESSION AS "MARATHON,
NOT SPRINT"

Classified By: Ambassador William Taylor. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C) Defense Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov, meeting with the Ambassador in Sevastopol March 27, declared that the GOU now regards NATO accession as a "marathon not a sprint." Recognizing that a membership invitation "will not take place in the near future," the GOU will devote itself to bringing Ukrainian forces up to NATO standards and contributing to NATO missions. The goal is to make Ukraine's eventual membership "indispensable" to the Alliance. Yekhanurov urged that NATO de-couple Ukraine's candidacy from that of Georgia. On public opinion, Yekhanurov admitted that the GOU had alienated many in Eastern Ukraine by pushing too hard on the use of the Ukrainian language. MOD is working to improve its public relations in the East and South, and seeks to increase its information campaign using Russian language materials.
End Summary.

MOD Investing in Sevastopol

2. (C) With the Ambassador in Sevastopol for the visit of a US guided missile frigate, the USS Klakring, Defense Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov invited him March 27 to the headquarters of the Ukrainian Black Sea Fleet. Unlike the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF), which is headquartered among historic buildings flying Russian flags in the center of Sevastopol, the Ukrainian BSF headquarters lies about 15 minutes out of town in a run-down area. Yekhanurov told the Ambassador he traveled to Crimea quarterly. Despite political differences with the "not pro-Ukrainian" elected Crimean leadership, Yekhanurov said that the Ukrainian fleet had good working relations with local authorities on practical matters.

3. (C) One of these matters is housing. Yekhanurov stressed that MOD had made housing for the Ukrainian BSF a top priority. He observed that in 2008, for the first time since independence, the GOU built more housing units for its naval forces than did the Russian BSF. This trend will only grow as Russia cuts back on construction. Planned Russian BSF cuts in support staff and military personnel contrasted with increased GOU engagement. Yekhanurov noted, for example, that in 2009, the MOD would open a military high school in Sevastopol, the first of its type outside Kyiv. This would not only demonstrate GOU commitment to its BSF, but would also generate hundreds of jobs at a time when Russia is cutting back.

Realism on NATO Accession

4. (C) Yekhanurov emphasized that NATO membership remains Ukraine's goal. However, he said the GOU understands that membership "will not take place in the near future." The Ukrainian leadership is well aware that given the opposition of France and others, it is "difficult" to discuss Ukraine's accession now. In addition, with presidential elections coming in Ukraine, the GOU itself needs to "remove tensions" associated with its push for NATO membership.

5. (C) As a result, Yekhanurov said, the GOU will focus on

practical matters: bringing Ukraine's military up to NATO standards and participating in as many NATO exercises and missions as possible. MOD seeks to demonstrate to Ukrainian public opinion that NATO accession will mean modernization of the military, such as adopting a brigade based system. He praised US assistance in helping Ukraine move toward interoperability. He noted US support for the NCO Academy in Kharkiv, and commended the recent visit to the Academy of the Sergeant Major of the Army.

"Indispensable"

¶16. (C) Ukraine's goal is to build up practical cooperation with NATO until Ukraine's accession becomes "indispensable."

The GOU would look for ways to show it brings special capabilities to the Alliance, such as strategic lift. It has already shown what advantages it can offer in the case of providing Denmark with lift capacity for Greenland. NATO members will see that they will be better off with Ukraine in NATO.

Separate NATO Candidacies of Georgia and Ukraine

¶17. (C) Yekhanurov said that the GOU recognized NATO accession was now a "marathon, not a sprint." With 2008's push for a MAP over, Ukraine now seeks NATO's de-coupling of the candidacies of Ukraine and Georgia. Quoting Tolstoy, Yekhanurov observed that "every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It is best to "disconnect" Ukraine from Georgia, and let each pursue its own candidacy.

Public Affairs/Use of Russian Language

¶18. (C) Yekhanurov admitted the GOU's push for the use of the Ukrainian language had contributed to public affairs difficulties for MOD by alienating Russian speakers in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Russian speakers should be considered no less patriotic to Ukraine than Ukrainian speakers, Yekhanurov declared. He noted that Donbass in the east, a pro-Russian region, had evolved. Yanukovych was twice elected as PM, demonstrating that the Donbass elite have bought in to the Ukrainian state. The situation in Crimea is different, and there is considerable education to do. If the GOU distributes materials in Ukrainian, as it has done, the material will not be read. MOD now seeks to support Russian language newspapers and TV which can give a balanced analysis of the situation. MOD is setting up an information department to increase its engagement with the mass media in the Russian language, particularly in Crimea.

Comment

¶19. (C) Yekhanurov's realism is encouraging. He is Yushchenko's man and speaks authoritatively for the President. NATO accession and the public anxiety about problems with Russia it engenders are issues the President appears to prefer not to highlight given upcoming elections. We reiterated, and Yekhanurov took on board, that the door to membership remains open. Yekhanurov did not use the occasion to express angst about Ukraine being left out in the cold. Judging from Yekhanurov, we expect a realistic GOU reaction to the summit.

TAYLOR